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The Populist Resentments of REALITY
TV

by Beth Seaton

Why "America's Most Wanted" and other shows like it make you lock your door at night.

There are moments in time when certain events appear inexplicable, whose severity and meanness seem just too sharp to grasp. "How did this happen?" we ask, and the answer we give, if we answer at all, tends to avoid difficult or uncomfortable explanations in favour of the easy response that such things are simply beyond our control.
In the city of Toronto, this response has become something of the chosen explanation for the election of Mike Harris and the extraordinary nature of his Conservative government's cut within the social and cultural sector. For those of us who live in this city whose choking air and ugliness are only made tolerable by its strong cultural environment, who consider ourselves enlightened and urban, and who only last spring were laughing at the mediocrity of this man with the face of a cartoon character, the consensus is that Harris was nominated for forces outside of our dominion. Simply put, it was those people out there—cut in the same weave-land of urban monster homes, or further out in the more pastoral, but equally mysterious novel territory—who brought Harris and his Key government to power. These are people who, by no means, lack any understanding of the life and experience of this city. While these may seem to be trivial in this national, the success of Harris's "common-sense revolution" extends beyond a simple talk of the country and the city. Nor may it be found within an economic explanation (the deficit), which is itself only a heuristic. It is dressed up as a truth. Rather, the conditions of this "revolu-
tion" may be found within the more nebulous and effective terrain of culture: that place where a hegemonic "common-sense" secures its nomination.

Harris's election is indicative of a fundamental shift in the cultural machinery of representation—where what is important (particularly for the look of both Conservatism is not limited to a culture and its inhabitants) is being erased, not critical distance, but an emotional closeness. Harris was able to put his policies into the sphere of controversy by speaking to people on a very subjective level. His attacks upon the deficit were void of the dry language of economic rationale, but rather outrage. His attacks upon the poor-labeled as "welfare cheats" and "immigr-
ants"—stepped into a mean and irrational paroxysm of the "other." Nothing was explained, only felt. What is most disturbing about the success of this "common-sense revolution" is how neatly it appears to parallel a shift in audiovisual culture: particularly in terms of how television now defines and shapes social problems. Television, as all students of the medium know, acts as an important—if not the preeminent—public sphere. The social meanings which are circulated and constructed within this apparatus vary much to our lives. As a commercial medium geared towards the entertainments of pro-
duction, television, in its perspective, has long been dependent upon its ability to sell us things—commodity goods, social values, common sense—just as elsewhere. As a mass medium which is also a household object, television is doubly articulated between pri-
ate lives and public worlds. It offers a felt connec-
tion between what is here and there and what is then, between what is actual and what is imagined. Much has changed in terms of the quality of television's mediations over the past ten years. Certainly, it remains an important part of the process by which we connect to the existing structure of power in society is produced; however, the process by which this production takes place has changed. Television, which is equally an aura as well as visual medium, no longer represents a cultural mon-
ism in culture and measured tones, but increasingly in the stimulating staccato of a talk-
radio host, a carnival hustler or a populous polit-
ician. Its persuasive intentions tap into and bring forth the new knowledges of insight, but the older abstractions of emotion: abstractions which pose the complexities of social in sentimental and spectacular terms.

Television (and this is old news) has gone talkies. It has moved more into private matters, and, in the manner of any skilled gossip, it does so with a sophisticated interweaving of the truth and the lie. The steady flow of television news has become entertainment: anchors engage in "happy talk," events are illustrated via computer-generated reenactments, and the "truth" methods of coverage are taken prone to be "hard" news. Indeed, many news programs are now produced under the networks' entertainment, rather than informative, division. This trend is reflected in news programming, such as the police dramas. 

Homicide. Life on the Street or NYPD Blue, mimic the scripted Stephen King-style of documented crime stories, and often base episodes upon "real-life" crimes. The lines between an authentically real and popular representation have blundered, and the ethos of this new form of distinctive is "realistic" program.

Real-life programming refers to an ongoing industry that labels which are articulated and network programs of tabloid television news-
magazines shows, videotape and sociocritical criticism, recovery and "real-life" purposes, and family-anonymous video shows. While the programs grouped under this generic rubric are admittedly varied, there are three consistent characteristics which underscore each. First is the reality show's visible reference to, or dramatization of, "real" events, people or problems. This depiction of the "real" involves a fictionalizing an unmediated rela-
tion to actuality, sometimes strains the bounds of the credible. Rather than relying upon actual document-
ary as "live," footages, reality programming often-
draws upon a mix of acting, "real" footage, interviews and reconstructions in a highly simulated pretense of the "real." Materialization of actuality—orchest-
rating the liberal use of flashy graphics, creative editing and evocative music—is largely geared towards self-pro-
motion, rather than informational, ends. In essence, the effect of the "real" in these shows is shown from popular memory and forms, specifically the popular forms of commodity culture. Second, these programs are the stuff of moral disorder and disaster—crime, cor-
ruption, sexual infamy, victimization—particularly as they take place within a private sphere. With the ran-
dom presence of sex, death and destruction is tempered in the family videoimages towards the "happy" parfils of domesticity (with the hardest fall awarded a cash prize), the tabloid and coping with mass media-ness and destruction as a constant threat whose existence demands social and moral rectitude. Hence, the supercilious con-
demnations of the tabloid, or the cop/standarm shows and their weekly variations on the theme of Nancy Reagan's staged catch-house bust, in which police, with camera wires in tow, make a "live" show of their pow-
er, or "compilation" and their moral convictions.

Finally, reality programs express their social or moral dilemmas in highly emotional terms, for this is crucial for their selfpropositional function. Importantly, it is feeling, rather than seeing, which is the basis for believing in these shows. Stress is laid upon individual and immediate manifestations, particularly in terms of how criminals and non-criminals are expected to react. In this respect, it is no longer a distant or neutral gaze which acts to establish actuality, but rather an appeal to subjective associations of which moral is the proximity of the depicted event to the experience of the audience. In other words, the audience affair on (inside) the events, the random mangling of cops, and the groom who throws up at his wedding on America's Funniest Home Videos are all events which can at-
some appropriate to the viewer. This appeal to subjective involvement is further established through certain participatory strategies that, in the sacred teret of "consumer choice," encourage audiences to interact with the pro-
gram. Thus, Viewers of Mad Love are offered 1396 numbers in order to place phone-in votes at the end of the show ("But or Love? Who do you believe?"—calls must be 18 years or older."). America's Most Wanted asks its viewers to exist in the capture of suspected fugi-
tives profiled on the show by calling the toll-free hotline 1-800-CMV-1TV. And studio audience members of America's Funniest Home Videos vote for the "funniest

video shows during the program.

There was a time when the tabloid shows were laughingly dismissed as there and tole robes of the programme schedule. Just as some of us, in a not-
too-distant past, found Mike Harris and his supporters to represent not the more progressive or "hearts and hands" extremities of an apocalyptic Progressive Conservative Party, so too were these shows held to address only a small constituency of the tabloid's audience: the depths of a low common denominator. Consumers of these programmes were imagined as the television vision of those unhinged women who supposedly frequent the supermarket's checkout lines—checking out the tabloid's sensational stories of lust, adultery and the occasional candlelight vigil—while waiting to buy the week's supplies of chewer's, wonder bread and diet coke. In effect, both the tabloid shows and their audiences were denied in an exhaustive framework of gestural, erotic and moral distinctions signifies, real-life shows could be read as the latent "feminine" mass culture which holds no produc-
tive or aesthetic value, but the last taste of the "femi-

nized" masses, who are consumed by the urge to toy into the small files and excessive fabrications of the tabloid's screaming headlines.

As reality programming was to mature and expand beyond the "fadish" confines of the tabloid show, its presence came to be perceived as less of a joke, than a threat. Emerging during a period of intensified competi-
tion for viewers and advertising revenue, reality shows quickly proved attractive to networks and syndicators in that they were not only cheap to produce and run, but were solid ratings performers. Before the 1989-90 sea-
son, the little rivalities that Fox built — the tabloid show A Current Affair (which debuted in 1988), the video-
(video) reality series Cops (1989), and the crooked "fam-

hust" series America's Most Wanted (1989)—stood alone. Soon after, however, similar candidates were offered by the Big Three networks which had the fore-
sight to recognize a good thing when they saw it in them, the ratings. It was then that the disas-

sional laugh became a paroxysm. The memoirs of men's culture were turned into the gutes, and we were asked to be vigilant to the ways in which, in the words of the Globe and Mail's Andrew Harvey, "the new masculinity is on the loose" as the "desire for adventure and aggression" is redefined. There was a time when the tabloid shows were laughingly dismissed as there and tole robes of the programme schedule. Just as some of us, in a not-
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content for the journalistic conventions of naturalism raised questions about our everincreasing relation to reality.

Undoubtedly, much of the massive expansion of reality programming may be attributed to the economic demands of a competitive television market. The crisis and confusion represented by the mutations of reality programming also led to a revolution among other changes in social semiotics. There are several factors that may contribute to these changes, among the most notable being the growing awareness of the power of the media and its potential to shape public opinion. This awareness has led to a greater emphasis on the role of the media in shaping public discourse and a growing concern about the potential for media to influence public opinion.

In addition, the growth of reality programming has also been shaped by the increasing availability of technology, which has made it easier for people to create and distribute their own content. This trend has been particularly evident in the rise of social media, which has provided a platform for individuals and small groups to share their experiences and perspectives with a wider audience. The impact of these trends on the production and consumption of reality programming is likely to continue to evolve in the coming years.